Blending Organizational Cultures Before, During and After a Fire Department Merger

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Certification Statement

I hereby certify that this paper constitutes my own product, that where the language of others is

set forth, quotation marks so indicate, and that appropriate credit is given where I have used the

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Abstract

The problem was the Lakewood and University Place Fire Departments merged into one organization, West Pierce Fire & Rescue (WPFR), but the cultures of these two organizations were not been fully blended. The purpose of the research was to identify strategies for blending these two cultures together to form a new culture which represents WPFR.

The descriptive research method was used in this study to answer the following questions: (a) How has private industry dealt with culture changes during a merger? (b) What have fire service organizations done to blend cultures after a merger? (c) How do the senior officers at West Pierce Fire & Rescue view the cultural changes due to the merger? (d) What do employees of West Pierce Fire & Rescue think about the cultural changes since the merger? The procedures included a literature review, several interviews were conducted and a questionnaire of West Pierce Fire & Rescue employees was performed.

The results showed organizations brought together in a merger rarely start with a common culture. Corporations and government entities who address the cultural issues before, during and after a merger are typically more successful.

Recommendations for future fire department mergers, whether it is WPFR or another fire service agency, are to conduct a culture due diligence study, effectively communicate with employees on all aspects of the merger, allow them to provide input and conduct cultural assessments prior to the merger, in the initial stages of the merger and post merger. The most important recommendation is to be proactive about cultural issues. Addressing cultural integration can mean the difference between a successful merger and a failed one.

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Blending Organizational Cultures as a Result of Fire Department Mergers

For many years, throughout the United States and abroad, organizations large and small have merged. The reasons for these mergers are varied, but the most common reasons given are reduced costs and increased efficiencies. One thing often overlooked in these mergers is culture. Overlooking the cultural issues can mean the difference between a value creating merger and one that destroys the value and ultimately fails (Herd & Silverstone, 2010).

On March 1, 2011 after two years of study, community input and preparation, the Lakewood and University Place Fire Departments merged to become West Pierce Fire & Rescue. Prior to the merger, Lakewood Fire Department served a population of approximately 60,000 residents covering an area of 22 square miles and University Place Fire Department served a population of 31,500 residents covering an area of 9 square miles according to U.S. Census Bureau (2005-2009). While the departments were very similar in regards to service levels, the way they conducted these services were often different.

The problem identified for this research was the Lakewood and University Place Fire Departments merged into one organization, West Pierce Fire & Rescue, but the cultures of the two organizations had not been fully blended. The purpose of the research was to identify strategies for blending the two cultures together to form a new culture representing WPFR. This research is very important because the whole purpose for merging the two departments was to create a more efficient and effective organization. If these cultures are not blended, the very efficiencies the merger was supposed to create can be eroded over time.

The descriptive research method was used in this study to answer the following questions: (a) How has private industry dealt with cultural changes following a merger? (b) What have other fire service organizations done to blend their cultures after a merger? (c) How do the

senior officers at West Pierce Fire & Rescue view the cultural changes in the organization? (d)

How do employees at West Pierce Fire & Rescue view the cultural changes in the organization?

Background and Significance

West Pierce Fire & Rescue (WPFR) is located between Seattle and Olympia on the I-5

corridor in Washington State. WPFR employs 216 men and women who provide basic life

support, advanced life support, fire suppression, hazardous materials mitigation, special

operations rescue and fire dispatch services along with fire prevention, fire and life safety

education and a host of other services.

A merger of two existing fire districts created WPFR. Pierce County Fire Protection

District 2 or Lakewood Fire Department was established in 1940 and Pierce County Fire District

3 or University Place Fire Department was established in 1941. The City of University Place

incorporated in 1995 and the City of Lakewood incorporated in 1996. Both cities annexed into

the fire district, making the fire districts an independent taxing authority within Pierce County

government, rather than two fire departments governed by municipal cities.

This is not the first time these two organizations have tried to come together. In 1995,

the Lakewood and University Place Fire Departments entered into an administrative

consolidation with plans to eventually merge the departments. According to Local 1488 Vice

President Dave Kuhn, this initial consolidation dissolved in 1998 due to differences in culture

and organizational structure. Over the years the two departments continued to provide mutual

aid services to one another. Since the initial effort in 1995, the two departments have changed

and are now more similar as far as the services they provide and the way those services are

provided.

In early 2009, the Fire Chiefs and Commissioners of the Lakewood and University Place Fire Departments began meeting to investigate viable partnerships and implement programs to provide more efficient and effective service levels for their taxpaying communities. The two departments had been providing mutual aid emergency response to each other for years and they had also partnered in many other areas, such as firefighter testing, emergency training, vehicle maintenance, special operations and 9-1-1 dispatch services.   The departments met regularly to study the benefits of regionalized fire and emergency services within the two communities. (Sharp & Sagers, 2009)

> On January 25, 2010, after a full year of study, Lakewood's Board of Fire Commissioners voted to petition University Place to merge the two fire districts. On February 27, 2010, University Place's Board of Fire Commissioners voted unanimously to accept Lakewood's petition for merger. This began a process that concluded on December 7, 2010, the Lakewood Board of Fire Commissioners voted unanimously to adopt a resolution that would place a measure on the February 8, 2011 ballot, asking Lakewood voters, "Shall Pierce County Fire Protection District 2 (Lakewood) be merged with Pierce County Fire Protection District 3 (University Place)?" The new organization would be known as West Pierce Fire & Rescue. (Sharp, 2011, p. 1)

On February 8, 2011, the Lakewood voters approved the merger with an 82% approval rating. At their meeting on March 1st, the Board of Fire Commissioners for both departments unanimously voted to approve the final resolutions making the merger official creating "West Pierce Fire & Rescue."

These two cities, while similar in nature, are also quite different. The City of University Place has a population of 31,610, the median household income is $50,287 with approximately

7.3% of the population falling below the poverty line. The City of Lakewood has a population of 57,575, the median household income is $36,422 and approximately 15.8% of the population falls below the poverty line (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005-2009).

The two fire districts offered many of the same services, but there were many programs offered in one district and not another. For example, both districts offered services such as fire suppression, basic and advanced life support, special operations rescue, fire prevention and fire and life safety education. Lakewood was a larger department and therefore had more resources to offer additional services such as marine rescue, hazardous materials mitigation and vehicle maintenance.

A year prior to the merger, operational transition committees were formed to decide how to best do business at WPFR. There were committees for nearly every topic, such as operations, fire prevention, uniforms, apparatus, public education, facilities and many more. These committees laid the foundation for how these two organizations would come together and operate when WPFR was formed. The transitional committees included comparisons of department operations and services provided, but did not include an assessment of the organizational cultures.

After the Lakewood and University Place Fire Departments officially merged to become West Pierce Fire & Rescue it became apparent these two cultures, while similar, had a fair number of differences. As cultural assimilation has long been considered a critical factor in successful mergers, delaying cultural alignment can cause management to risk the new organizational culture moving in a direction that does not align with the organization's objectives (Herd & Silverstone, 2010). Therefore, it is necessary to discover useful strategies to blend these cultures while the merger is in the early stages.

Conducting research on how to effectively blend organizational cultures after a merger relates to the topic of change management in the Executive Development course in the National Fire Academy's Executive Fire Officer Program (National Fire Academy, 2010). The research also relates to the United States Fire Administration's operational goal of improving the professional status of fire and emergency services'.

Literature Review

A literature review indicates that for years, organizations across the country have conducted mergers as a way to provide greater efficiencies and cut costs. Research was conducted to determine strategies corporations and other government agencies have used to deal with blending cultures before, during and after a merger. Research was then conducted to see what other fire departments had done to blend cultures following a merger. And finally research was conducted to determine how the senior officers at West Pierce Fire & Rescue viewed the cultural changes in the organization and how employees view the cultural changes in the organization?

First and foremost it is important to define culture.

Culture can be defined as a pattern of shared basic assumptions learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, which has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems (Schein, 2010, p. 18).

Organizations brought together in a merger rarely start with a common culture. The management team must have the ability to assess the differences and take steps to address them

early on. This can mean the difference between a value creating merger and one that destroys

the value and ultimately fails (Herd & Silverstone, 2010).

Herd and Silverstone also found cultural assessments, built through surveys and

interviews of key managers, can help define the desired cultural state along with the risks for

different culture combinations. Employee surveys can help explore numerous cultural

characteristics, such as teamwork, trust, diversity, autonomy, communication and fiscal fixation.

They further believe assessing the two cultures is not a one-time event. They should be assessed

prior to the merger, in the beginning stages of the merger and again post merger to identify and

address any unanticipated challenges.

Pritchett (2010) studied corporate mergers and acquisitions and discussed the importance

of examining cultures during a merger. They say, often times executives make the mistake of

focusing on a few cultural similarities as proof that a merger would work, not taking into account

some of the crucial differences that can ruin their chances for a successful merger. Culture clash

can even change the economics of a merger, as incompatibilities can carry a huge cost. More

often than not when mergers and acquisitions fail, people blame the culture.

Pritchett also found in the research that 60% of corporations do not conduct formal

programs specifically designed to facilitate cultural integration during a merger or acquisition,

leaving cultural integration to chance. The Pritchett research findings indicate culture should be

a more strategic consideration in the merger process and cultural integration should be driven

from the top-down. They also cite communication as a key element in shaping the behavior of

employees in the desired cultural direction.

Weber & Camerer (2003) discovered the majority of mergers fail. This is at odds with

how the public perceives mergers as being wonderful things, sure to create greater efficiencies.

One example they gave was the merger of Daimler-Chrysler. Prior to their merger, both corporations were high performing. Performance after the merger, especially for Chrysler, was much lower. Prior to the merger Chrysler was the most profitable American auto maker, but after the merger it began losing money. This was a direct result of cultural differences between Daimler and Chrysler. Daimler-Benz's culture included a more formal and structured management style and Chrysler was more relaxed. Daimler-Benz's culture became dominant and employee satisfaction at Chrysler took a huge downturn which resulted in the departure of many key executives and engineers. Those employees who stayed at Chrysler became extremely dissatisfied as Daimler continued to take over the entire organization imposing their culture on everyone.

During the merger of Daimler-Chrysler the culture clash between the two corporations eroded any anticipated savings. Chrysler and Daimler-Benz had completely different brand images as well as corporate culture. The Chrysler brand image was one of American excess, risk-taking and "cowboy bravado," while Mercedes-Benz had an image of excellent German engineering and high quality. Chrysler aimed to produce vehicles at a targeted cost, while Daimler Benz was committed to quality at any cost. These differences lead to many of the managers who had built Chrysler's "cowboy bravado" to leave the company. As these leaders left, the culture gradually eroded and the Chrysler division became less and less competitive (Finkelstein 2002).

Daimler-Benz tried to run Chrysler the same way it had run their German operations. The problem with this was a complete difference in cultures. Diamler-Benz made decisions in a very methodical fashion and most decisions came from the top, while Chrysler had always allowed creativity and encouraged adaptability at all levels. These culture clashes lead to the

ultimate failure of this merger and in May of 2007 Daimler finally sold Chrysler to the private

equity firm Cerberus Capital. ("Daimler, Chrysler and the failed merger," 2008)

There are also examples of successful mergers. One such merger is Hewlett Packard and

Compaq. In a document written by Murray Allen (2002) she discusses what Hewlett Packard did

regarding cultural integration when they acquired Compaq in May of 2002. Murray Allen was

the cultural integration director during the merger and explains how the integration of cultures is

a factor for success in nearly every merger or acquisition. It is easy to see the importance of

cultural integration, but it is much more difficult to complete the task. She found that decisions

regarding product portfolios and the assignment of key accounts are more concrete and therefore

not as difficult as discussing how we can work together.

HP started by conducting a culture due diligence (CDD) study. In this case HP actually

acquired Compaq, but it was treated as a merger of equals. Between HP and Compaq there were

a total of 155,000 employees, of which 100,000 were originally HP employees and 55,000 had

started with Compaq. A total of 1,600 employees representing both organizations participated in

the study. Participants represented various levels of the organization, businesses within the

organization and regions around the world. The study revealed valuable information from

employees of both pre-merge companies regarding what they valued most in their organizations,

what they hoped for in the merger and where they felt the companies were weak and strong. HP

used this information to develop what they called the "culture cornerstones."

Murray Allen (2002) also provided information in her report about some traps to avoid.

One such trap is getting a small group of people together to create some values that sound great

on the surface, but have no real ties to the organization. These values are then turned into a

marketing campaign utilizing posters and t-shirts released to employees with great fanfare on day

one of the new company. These marketing campaigns often fail to address the actual culture of

the organization. "Culture is only real when each and every employee is engaged with the values

in a way that is meaningful and believable to them" (Murray Allen, 2002, p. 2). Transition can be

very difficult if the values created by a small group of people are not representative of the actual

values of the employees.

The Cultural Integration Team (CIT) discovered that prior to the merger HP had a very

strong culture. People both inside and outside the company pointed to the "HP Way" of doing

things. A lot of time and energy had gone in to documenting the values, objectives and practices

at HP and it had meaning for their people. In contrast, Compaq did not have a strong culture,

there was no one "Compaq Way," which was not seen as a positive thing.

The approach taken by the CIT was to start with the "HP Way" framework for describing

the culture. They then looked at the values from Compaq and HP and added input from the

cultural due diligence study. From there, the CIT rewrote the values and common corporate

objectives utilizing the HP framework. They did not start with a clean sheet of paper. Both

companies had values and beliefs they wanted to preserve. They found that change and

uncertainty can create anxiety and sometimes it is more important to discuss what to keep as

opposed to what should change.

Employees at HP were concerned their culture was going to erode in the merger. The

"HP Way" was what had brought many of these employees to the company in the first place.

They did not want to see this culture go away. To solve this issue the CIT team started with the

values statements articulated by both HP and Compaq and realized there were many things that

did not need to change. There were some items that required change because they were out of

date. The important values were taken from both companies and they came up with a revised

"HP Way." In the end, they had seven core values and seven common corporate objectives related to those values which were referred to as the culture cornerstones.

The next step for HP was to engage their employees around the "New HP Way." The CIT created a Fast Start program. These were designed to be interactive sessions where each person was engaged in answering the following questions, "What has changed in the new HP? What is expected of me? How do I want to engage with my team to get work done?" In addition to the Fast Start Program, a Culture in Action was created. The Culture in Action started with an HP Way Web Page. There was one place employees could go to read about the culture, history and values of the organization. This did not previously exist under either organization. They then did some research to find stories within the organization where the values had already been implemented. These stories were featured for other employees to read in hopes of gaining inspiration from them.

Cultural integration takes time. "If we truly believe that it is about what we chose to preserve that enables change, and that culture definition is a reflective process of looking back and acknowledging what we value in how we work, then we must give people time to come together to determine what the behaviors are that are going to work for them" (Murray Allen 2002, p. 7).

The cultural integration and increased profitability at HP did indeed take time as well as a new CEO. Carly Fiorina was the CEO of HP at the time of the merger. She was the architect of the merger. She made the merger happen despite opposition from both the Hewlett and Packard family members who sat on the board for HP. Fiorina set up the integration team early on to develop the operational plan to integrate the two companies. This meant the team was ready to begin the day the new company was announced. Fiorina reached the short term goal of cutting

$2.5 billion dollars from the operating budget, which exceeded expectations by more than $1 billion dollars. This is where the experts agree Fiorina took a wrong turn. She focused almost exclusively on the very complex operational integration, but she failed to focus on the strategic integration of the merger. In 2005, three years after the merger, Fiorina was replaced by Mark Hurd. He took the pieces assembled by Fiorina, applied his management skills to them and created a more profitable and increasingly valuable company (LaPlante, 2007).

According to Irwin (2009), Carly Fiorina was hired to solve some operational problems at HP caused by the long standing culture, but instead of leading the HP Way in a new direction, she turned her back on the Way altogether. Fiorina was a very high profile manager with abrupt management methods which were often at odds with the paternal and understated culture of HP. Prior to Fiorina, HP fostered an environment where employees felt they could speak up and voice their ideas and concerns. After Carly, the environment became one of distrust and employees feared speaking up. While she was successful with the early integration efforts, she never bothered to learn the HP culture, in spite of putting all of the integration teams in place. It took a new leader, Mark Hurd, to focus on the strategic integration and not just the operational integration (Grocer, 2007).

In the end, HP and Compaq truly created a new culture as a result of the steps taken by top leaders and the cultural integration team. There are no longer any "red" or "blue" teams, just one new HP. The successes were not just in developing a new culture, but they maintained a focus on the customer, were able to continually improve products and profits also increased in the years following the merger (A. Murray Allen, personal communication, July 19, 2011).

These are two examples of how cultural integration was addressed in private industry. Many government agencies have taken part in mergers and acquisitions. So much so that the

United States General Accounting Office [GAO] (2003) published a list of key practices and

implementation steps for mergers. The report notes the following steps: a) Top leadership must

establish the direction of the change. b) A clear mission must be established to guide the

changes. c) Key principles and priorities must be established to create the new culture. d)

Timelines and goals must be set to show employees that progress is being made. e) An

implementation team must be established to make sure the goals are being attained. f) Define

responsibilities so that employees know their work contributes to the overall success of the

organization. g) Two-way communications must be established. h) Employees must be involved

in the transformation. i) Adopt a vision that encourages employees to adopt the most efficient,

effective and economical practices.

　　　While researching corporations who merged, Weiss (1998) noticed that even companies

in the same industry who entered a friendly merger often saw profits and productivity decline

rather than improve. This is due to the fact that companies often do things differently. Their

policies and procedures may be different as well as their culture.

　　　　Culture is defined as a set of assumptions, beliefs, values and norms distinct to a specific

　　　　group. It is visible in the symbols and traditions the culture holds dear. These artifacts

　　　　become the boundaries behind which the culture and its members feel secure. Threats to

　　　　the boundary and fear of what lies beyond it can cause a normally passive culture to

　　　　become violently aggressive (Weiss, 1998, p. 74)

　　　Weiss applied this research to the fire service and found cultural immersion is a proven

method of reducing cross-cultural tension. Firefighters should be forced to work with employees

from the other agency as well as their own. They will see how the other half lives, which will

reduce cultural stereotypes and allow a blended culture to develop on its own.

Firefighter's resistance to change is a myth. This can apply to fire department mergers and consolidations. People only resist change if they don't see a benefit, if they don't perceive the benefits of the change to be worth the sacrifices they will make to achieve that change, or if they didn't help to create the change. If you let people have input and create solutions to problems they will have more buy-in and morale will also increase. Let firefighters be a part of the change you are trying to make in your department (Alyn, 2011).

Karpluk and Quan (2010) found fire service culture cannot be changed overnight. In order to get employees excited about a change in culture the leaders must challenge them and give them the authority of improve their department. If employees feel empowered and involved in the change they will take ownership and feel a sense of pride in it.

Communication was found to be very important in regards to cultural integration. One of the most important steps when implementing change is to maintain open communications. The communication strategies you use will depend upon the breadth and depth of change. Continually communicating a positive and compelling mission is essential. Effective communication can lessen resistance to the desired change.   Lack of understanding by employees can create an atmosphere of uncertainty and distrust of management. Without knowledge, rumors often start. These rumors can circulate quickly through a department, which then requires a great deal of effort to the counter. Uncertainty can cause even the most forward thinking employee to become confrontational. (Revere, 2010, p. 98)

Leaders from other fire districts in Pierce County were interviewed to see what they had done to blend cultures following a merger. Deputy Chief John McDonald with East Pierce Fire & Rescue (EPFR) was the first to be interviewed on June 27, 2011. East Pierce was created in January of 2000 when two smaller fire departments merged to become one. Since that time, five

additional departments have joined EPFR. The rationale for these mergers was never to give

money back to the taxpayers, but to do more with the money they had. Through mergers EPFR

was able to create efficiencies which reduced their costs in some areas so they could provide

more firefighters on the street. EPFR is a combination department consisting of career and

volunteer firefighters.

EPFR did not do a formal cultural assessment prior to the first merger, but the two

original departments had worked closely together. With each additional merger it became more

difficult to assimilate the different organizational cultures. When asked how the employees have

coped with the changes in the department, Deputy Chief John McDonald said "change is always

hard and different personalities can make things difficult, but on the whole the employees have

coped very well."

In the later years, EPFR completed a more formalized evaluation process prior to their

mergers. They began to draw people in and let them be part of the process. This allowed for

more open communications and employee involvement. They also found it necessary to mix

employees up after a merger. They had success in initially having employees move stations

voluntarily and over time rebidding their station assignments all together. It was much more

difficult to mix up the volunteers because they have a great deal of pride in their smaller

communities.

Chief Doug Willis and Deputy Chief Keith Wright from Central Pierce Fire & Rescue

(CPFR) were also interviewed. CPFR began in 1990 with a merger between the Midland and

Parkland Fire Departments. In 1992 talks began with Summit and Spanaway Fire Departments.

In 1992 these agencies began training together and in 1994 the three departments consolidated.

In 1996 these departments officially merged becoming CPFR. In 2009, CPFR merged with the

Puyallup Fire Department to create a department which covers the largest geographic area in Pierce County.

The motivation for the CPFR mergers was to provide better staffing and improved services with a more efficient department and no increase in taxes. The department's primary focus in the merger was for no one to lose their job. By ensuring people they will maintain their lifestyle, employees are more likely to be on board.

No cultural assessments were done prior to any of the mergers. When asked if the department had difficulty in assimilating different organizational cultures Chief Willis said "Every organization has good people. The best of the cultures will rise to the surface and the things we don't do so well seem to go away."

The CPFR merger with Puyallup was different than their other mergers. Puyallup was a municipal (city) department while CPFR was a county fire district. These two types of departments have extremely different cultures and operational models. The previous mergers undergone by CPFR were with similar county fire districts.

Deputy Chief Wright was asked about unforeseen challenges they faced during the merger with Puyallup. Chief Wright explained this merger was done much more quickly than their previous mergers due to the fact that all of the political pieces were in line and things could change at any time. One challenge they faced was not anticipating how upset the Puyallup personnel would be when given a CPFR Policy Manual and told this is how they would be doing business in the future. This is something Deputy Chief Wright admitted they would have done differently if they had more time to implement the merger.

Chief Willis provided this advice for departments who planned to merge their operations. "Move slowly and be systematic. Keep everyone informed, if you don't they will think the worst. Let employees know that no one will lose anything and they will be more supportive."

To determine the answer to the research question, "How do the senior officers at West Pierce Fire & Rescue view the cultural changes in the organization?" Fire Chief Ken Sharp of WPFR and former Chief of Lakewood Fire District 2 was interviewed. According to Chief Sharp the motivation for the merger was to be more efficient and effective. The two departments were so much alike it didn't make sense not to merge. When Chief Sharp was asked what the department's primary focus was during the merger he said, "If I had been asked that question prior to the merger, the answer would have been much different, but the focus quickly became the people." By the people, he referred to both the internal and external customers. The external customers being the community who did not want to lose their identity. Both cities had departments that were over 70 years old with rich histories and traditions and the communities loved their respective departments. The internal customers were the employees, who also did not want to lose their identities.

Chief Sharp felt the department has had difficulties blending the cultures, noting a true blending of culture takes time and most likely won't happen for approximately 3-5 years. He believes WPFR has yet to create one new culture and won't for several years. The vast majority of employees has come to grips with the merger and understands it's not a bad thing, but there will always be naysayers.

When asked what advice he would give to other departments going through a merger Chief Sharp said, "Mergers are emotional. Until you can get through the emotions, you cannot get to the business of conducting a merger."

Deputy Chief Mitch Sagers of WPFR, and former Fire Chief at University Place Fire Department was also interviewed. Deputy Chief Sagers believes the Lakewood culture dominated during the merger due to the size of the departments and the efforts that Lakewood had done on long range planning. Lakewood was twice the size of University Place prior to the merger.

Chief Sagers was also asked what specific processes helped WPFR to assimilate different organizational cultures into one and he pointed to the transitional committee planning process. This process allowed the employees from both Lakewood and University Place to come together and discuss various topic areas to decide how to best do business at WPFR. Some of the committees included operations, training, public education, fire prevention, marketing, administration and information technology. These committees formed the policies and procedures that WPFR employees would operate under. The one thing these committees did not focus on was the culture.

When asked what advice he would give to other departments going through a merger Deputy Chief Sagers said, "Learn from those who have gone before you. Administrators should utilize a consultant. The consultant we hired was invaluable in getting the policy boards on the same page."

To answer the research question; how do employees at West Pierce Fire & Rescue view the cultural changes in the organization, WPFR Local 1488 President Layne Bladow and Vice President Dave Kuhn were both interviewed. Layne was the President of the former Lakewood Firefighters Union and Dave was the Vice President of the former University Place Firefighters Union.

When Layne Bladow was interviewed on July 18, 2011 he was asked if he felt the department has had difficulty assimilating different organizational cultures into one and he felt the biggest issue for employees was the unknown. The atmosphere was different in University Place, as their commissioners were historically more involved in operational decisions, while in Lakewood they were more policymakers. Lakewood employees were unsure if and how this would affect them.

President Bladow did not feel one culture dominated in the merger. In fact, he thought there were still separate cultures depending on the station you work at. He felt time was necessary to help to blend these cultures. Layne did not believe having multiple cultures in the organization had an effect on the efficiency of the department although he did feel it affected morale. He thought employees were still unsure of how things are going to be in the future, but over time it will get easier.

Vice President Dave Kuhn was interviewed on July 19, 2011. He felt there are some aspects where the department had difficulty assimilating the different organizational cultures into one. For example, you still heard a lot of "that's not how we do it." He thought we needed to learn how each agency did things before a decision can be made on how we want to do things moving forward as WPFR. He believes employees are coping very well with the changes brought on by the merger, given the magnitude of those changes.

Vice President Kuhn spoke to the previous merger attempt by the two districts back in the 1990s. He said, "The earlier process had no involvement from the employees. This time all the groups were involved. This process is what made the merger a success." He feels that WPFR is a model for the way departments should merge. They gave the labor representatives the ability to

provide input in the process. The contracts were aligned prior to the merger and employees had

an opportunity to train together and get to know one another prior to the official merge.

The purpose of this project was to identify strategies for blending the cultures of the

former Lakewood and University Place Fire Departments into one new culture that represents

West Pierce Fire & Rescue. The literature review examined all four of the questions for the

project; a) How has private industry dealt with cultural changes following a merger? b) What

have other fire service organizations done to blend their cultures after a merger? c) How do the

senior officers at West Pierce Fire & Rescue view the cultural changes in the organization? d)

How do employees at West Pierce Fire & Rescue view the cultural changes in the organization?

The literature showed the majority of mergers fail to accomplish their intended goals

simply because the cultural differences have been overlooked. Culture is not something that can

be ignored. It is very important to conduct cultural assessments before, during and after a merger

(Herd & Silverstone, 2010).

All of the literature had the common theme of two-way communication as a necessity in

blending cultures whether they are in a corporation or a fire department. Senior leaders need to

establish the direction of the change and provide employees with a clear mission they can

embrace. They also need to take the time to listen to their employees' concerns regarding the

merger. If this two-way communication does not occur and employees do not feel informed they

will create their own truth in the form of a rumor. These rumors spread and can cause employee

dissatisfaction.

Another common theme in the literature is the need for employees to have input. If

people feel they are part of the change they are much more likely to embrace it. Employees are

much more likely to do what management wants them to do if they see a benefit. If they have

had input they will feel a sense of pride and ownership in the change and morale will improve, which is a good thing for any organization (Alyn, 2011; Karpluk & Quan, 2010; GAO, 2003).

It is clear from the findings of others that WPFR would benefit from having a unified organizational culture. Organizations with strong unified cultures are generally more successful than those without a unified culture. The literature also provided some clear steps which can be used to blend cultures together after a merger, such as cultural immersion. This is the process of having firefighters from both organizations working together side by side to see how the other half lives (Weiss, 1998).

The findings show organizational culture is a very important aspect to focus on during a merger. Ignoring the culture can lead to a merger failure. Properly focused leadership, a clear vision, conducting a cultural due diligence study, good two-way communication and employee involvement can help multiple cultures within an organization become blended into one unified culture.

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Procedures

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Research for this project initially began in March of 2011 at the Learning Resource Center (LRC) on the campus of the National Fire Academy (NFA), in Emmitsburg, Maryland. Utilizing the online card catalog, a search was performed using keywords: culture change, mergers and culture change, corporate culture and mergers, fire department mergers and fire department culture change.

From March of 2011 to August of 2011 multiple internet searches were conducted utilizing Google.com and msn.com search engines. The search terms included corporate mergers and culture change, corporate culture, corporate culture after a merger and fire department mergers and culture change.

The purpose of the literature review was to help answer the following research questions.

(a)   How has private industry dealt with cultural changes following a merger?

(b)   What have other fire service organizations done to blend their cultures after a

merger?

(c)   How do the senior officers at West Pierce Fire & Rescue view the cultural

changes in the organization?

(d)   How do employees at West Pierce Fire & Rescue view the cultural changes in the

organization?

The next research procedure involved interviewing several people who had been through either a corporate or fire department merger.   All of the people I interviewed were asked the following questions.

- When did your organization begin merging with other organizations?

- What was the size of your organization and the structure?

- What was the motivation for the merger?

- What was the primary focus when putting together the merger?

- Did your organization do a cultural assessment prior to the merger?

- Do you feel your organization has had difficulty assimilating different

  organizational cultures into a single culture?

- Did the organization go through a strategic planning process to address concerns

  associated with merging the different organizational cultures?

- How do you feel employees coped with the changes in the organization?

- Do you feel one culture has dominated in the merger?

- Do you feel there are multiple organizational cultures within your organization?

- If you feel there are multiple organizational cultures, what effect do you think this has on the efficiency of the department?

- If you feel there is a unified organizational culture, can you identify specific processes that helped you assimilate different organizational cultures into a unified organizational culture?

- How long do you think it has or will take to assimilate multiple organizational cultures into a unified organizational culture?

- Do you perceive different cultures within the same organization as a problem?

- Were there any unforeseen challenges management faced during the merger?

- What advice would you give to other organizations going through or thinking about a merger?

The first interview was conducted with WPFR Fire Chief Ken Sharp. Prior to being the Chief at WPFR, Ken was the Fire Chief at Lakewood Fire District 2. Ken was chosen as an important person to interview since he was one of the driving forces behind the merger. The interview was conducted on June 9, 2011 at a local restaurant. The interview began at 7:30 am and ended at 9:00 am. The purpose of this interview was to conduct original research to answer the following research question: How do the senior officers at West Pierce Fire & Rescue view the cultural changes in the organization?

The next interview conducted was with WPFR Deputy Chief, Mitch Sagers. Prior to being the Deputy Chief at WPFR he was the Fire Chief of the University Place Fire Department. The interview was conducted on June 30th at Fire Station 31 in University Place. The interview began at 2:00 pm and concluded at 2:30 pm. The purpose of this interview was to conduct

original research to answer the following research question: How do the senior officers at West Pierce Fire & Rescue view the cultural changes in the organization?

Deputy Chief John McDonald of East Pierce Fire & Rescue was interviewed on June 27, 2011 at 3:00 pm at the East Pierce Headquarters Station in Bonney Lake, WA. The interview concluded at approximately 3:30 pm. Deputy Chief McDonald has been with the organization through multiple mergers and has a lot of experience with cultural issues that often follow. The purpose of this interview was to conduct original research to answer the following research question: What have other fire service organizations done to blend their cultures after a merger?

Fire Chief Doug Willis and Deputy Chief Keith Wright of Central Pierce Fire & Rescue were interviewed on July 11th at 8:30 am at their headquarters station in Spanaway, WA. The interview concluded at 9:15 am. Both Chief Willis and Deputy Chief Wright have been through multiple mergers, the most recent happening in 2009 when Central Pierce merged with the City of Puyallup Fire Department. The purpose of this interview was to conduct original research to answer the following research question: What have other fire service organizations done to blend their cultures after a merger?

President of West Pierce Firefighters Local 1488, Layne Bladow was interviewed on July 18, 2011 at 1:15 pm at West Pierce Fire Station 20 located in Lakewood, WA. Prior to the merger Layne was the President of Lakewood Firefighters Local 1488. He was involved in all phases of the merger and therefore understands the viewpoint of the former Lakewood firefighters. The purpose of this interview was to conduct original research to answer the following research question: How do employees at West Pierce Fire & Rescue view the cultural changes in the organization?

Vice President of West Pierce Firefighters Local 1488, Dave Kuhn was interviewed on July 19th, 2011 at West Pierce Fire Station 20 located in Lakewood, WA. Prior to the merger Dave was the Vice President of University Place Firefighters Local 2105. Dave was also involved in all phases of the merger and understands the viewpoint of the former University Place Firefighters. The purpose of this interview was to conduct original research to answer the following research question: How do employees at West Pierce Fire & Rescue view the cultural changes in the organization?

The final interview conducted was with Anne Murray Allen of HP. The interview was conducted on July 19th at 8:00 am. Anne Murray Allen was selected to provide a viewpoint on corporate mergers. She was the Cultural Integration Director for the Hewlett-Packard and Compaq merger. The purpose of this interview was to conduct original research to answer the following question: How has private industry dealt with cultural changes following a merger?

The next research procedure involved distributing a questionnaire to all 216 West Pierce Fire & Rescue employees.   The questionnaire was distributed to all employees through the department e-mail system. Reminders were sent out on two separate occasions, giving employees more than one opportunity to complete it. The questionnaire was distributed on April 19, 2011. The results were collected on July 20th with eighty responses. The following questions were asked:

1. Which organization did you work for prior to the merger?

    a. Lakewood Fire District 2

    b. University Place Fire Department

2. (Optional) How long have you been on the job?

    a. 0-5 years

    b. 6-10 years

    c. 11-15 years

    d. 16-20 years

    e. Over 20 years

3. (Optional) My current job at WPFR would be classified as:

    a. Suppression

    b. Day Shift

    c. Fire Communications

4. Choose the category that best fits your feeling on each of the following statements.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree

    a. My ideas are heard by my immediate supervisor.

    b. I feel comfortable expressing my ideas in the organization.

    c. I have seen drastic cultural changes in the organization since the merger.

    d. The culture changes have been mostly positive.

    e. The culture changes have been mostly negative.

    f. Communications have improved since we became WPFR.

    g. The way we do business has changed now that we are WPFR.

    h. The traditions to which I was accustomed have changed now that we are

        WPFR.

    i. I believe that customer service is important at WPFR.

    j. I have fun coming to work at WPFR.

    k. I understand the mission of WPFR.

l. I feel WPFR is the right size to provide optimal service to the community.

m. WPFR could better serve our community if we merged with other fire service organizations.

n. WPFR has created one new culture.

o. WPFR is just a larger version of Lakewood Fire District 2.

p. WPFR is just a larger version of University Place Fire Department.

5. Give some examples of the positive cultural changes you have seen now that we are WPFR.

6. Give some examples of the negative cultural changes you have seen now that we are WPFR.

7. How can we improve communications at WPFR?

8. What did management do right in the merger process in regards to promoting a positive culture?

9. What could management have done differently to make the merger process easier on the staff?

Questionnaire responses were compiled into a Word document titled West Pierce Fire & Rescue Culture Change Questionnaire (Appendix A). Data analysis was conducted on the responses for the purpose of conducting original research to answer the following research question: How do employees at West Pierce Fire & Rescue view the cultural changes in the organization?

The survey was developed utilizing a combination of replicating a previous survey conducted by Howes (1999, p. 32) and sitting down with WPFR Chief Ken Sharp to determine what kinds of things he could utilize from such a questionnaire.

There were several limitations encountered during the research. The first limitation was the questionnaire. According to Schein (2010), questionnaires can be problematic. Often times those who are conducting the questionnaires do not know exactly what to ask. Employees may not be motivated to be honest. They may not always understand the questions you are asking. Measurements may be accurate, but may only get at what's on the surface as opposed to the reasons behind their answers. The sample of employees surveyed may not have been representative of the group. In this questionnaire results were limited by the number of responses received. It was sent to all 216 employees with only 80 of them completing it.

The other limitation encountered during the research is the plethora of information on culture change. There has been so much research completed on this topic it was very overwhelming to decipher which research was relevant to the questions addressed in this project. The time constraints of the applied research project also made it difficult to fully digest the volumes of available information.

Results

Through descriptive research, utilizing a literature review, a survey, and personal interviews; answers to each of the four research questions were established.

The first research question asked in this project was; how has private industry dealt with cultural changes following a merger? Through the literature review and interviews, it was clear companies handle the blending of cultures during a merger in a variety of ways. Many corporations do nothing to blend the cultures before, during or after a merger. Most of these corporations did not see very successful mergers as in the example of Diamler-Chrysler.

Culture should be a more strategic consideration in the merger process and cultural integration should be driven from the top-down. Often times, executives make the mistake of

focusing on a few cultural similarities as proof that a merger would work, not taking into account some of the crucial differences that can ruin their chances for a successful merger (Pritchett, 2010).

Organizations brought together in a merger rarely start with a common culture. The management team must have the ability to assess the differences and take steps to address them early on. Cultural assessment is not a one-time event. The cultures should be assessed prior to the merger, in the beginning stages of the merger and again post merger to identify and address any unanticipated challenges (Herd & Silverstone, 2010).

An example of a corporation who considered culture in their merger process was Hewlett Packard and Compaq. In an interview with Anne Murray Allen conducted on July 19th, 2011 she shared information regarding the Cultural Integration Team she was a part of during the HP merger with Compaq. She described the cultural due diligence process she was a part of, which included conducting interviews of top managers from both Compaq and HP. After these interviews they conducted focus groups with a cross section of people from each company. Both groups of employees were taken through the process of defining their values and mission. Allen (personal communication July 19, 2011) stated "By focusing on what they value and what they want to conserve it made it easier for employees to let everything else go. This also relieves change anxiety because they know their core values will not change."

The initial operational integration was very successful at HP and Compaq. The Cultural Integration Team was so successful the new company was ready to go the day the merger was approved. After the initial merger, many of the long term strategic goals of the company were not being met. Much of this was attributed to the leader Carly Fiorina and her attempt to change the culture of HP without really knowing what the culture was to begin with. It is believed the

Cultural Integration Team was disbanded too soon. Mark Hurd was appointed as CEO in 2005

and he had the management skills to turn things around. The merger between HP and Compaq

ended up being very successful in the long term (LaPlante, 2007).

The second research question asked was; what have other fire service organizations done

to blend their cultures after a merger? Through literature review and interviews the fire service

was found to be slightly different from corporations, but much can be learned from the corporate

world. The main difference in the fire service is as Chief Willis of Central Pierce Fire & Rescue

stated, "The department's primary focus in the merger was that no one would lose their job"

(personal communication July 11, 2011). This statement rang true for all the fire service

personnel who were interviewed for this research project. This is not the case in corporate

mergers, where often times the cost savings come from the elimination of duplicate positions. In

the fire service many of these duplicated positions are eliminated through attrition as opposed to

layoffs.

Central Pierce Fire & Rescue has gone through several mergers and they have utilized

different approaches to accomplish blending cultures. In the early years they took things pretty

slowly. In 1992, talks started between Parkland, Midland, Summit and Spanaway. In 1994, these

departments consolidated services with the official merger not taking place until 1996. Their

merger with Puyallup was different because they did not have four years to get the employees

used to the idea of merging. The political landscape was right and they could not wait because

the pendulum could swing in the other direction and the merger would not have happened. In a

perfect world Chief Willis would give this advice to other fire departments entering into a

merger. "Move slowly and be systematic. Keep everyone informed, if you don't they will think

the worst. Let employees know that no one will lose anything and they will be more supportive"

(personal communication July 11, 2011).   This statement coincides with what Revere (2010) says about the importance of communication. If employees do not have information they will make it up in the form of a rumor. This misinformation, which gets circulated as fact, will take a great deal of effort to counter.

East Pierce Fire & Rescue has also gone through multiple mergers. East Pierce was originally formed with the merger of the Bonney Lake and Lake Tapps Fire Department back in January of 2000, but conversations started long before that in the early 1990s. The department now also serves the areas covered by the former Pierce County Fire Districts 12 and 20, Sumner, Edgewood and Milton Fire Departments. Deputy Chief John McDonald admits they did not do a formal cultural assessment prior to the mergers, but they did allow personnel to switch stations before the merger.

EPFR had some difficulty assimilating the different organizational cultures into a single culture although Deputy Chief McDonald felt most of the differences were small. EPFR was founded on a customer service culture. Not all of the departments they merged with brought that same focus with them and were required to make some cultural changes. Change can be hard for employees during a merger, and different personalities can make it difficult, but most employees at EPFR handled the changes well.

According to Deputy Chief McDonald some processes which helped EPFR blend the different organizational cultures were things they learned in the later years. After they had done several mergers they started doing a formal evaluation process and got employees involved. By drawing people in and allowing them to be part of the process they were more committed to the merger. He also stated how important communication was to their success.

When asked what advice he would give to other agencies going through a merger, Deputy Chief McDonald said to mix people up. He thought it was important to mix employees up voluntarily, but the quicker this is done, the better. This is in line with what Weiss (1998) found in his research, which he applied to the fire service. He found cultural immersion to be a proven method of reducing cross-cultural tension. Firefighters should be forced to work with employees from the other agency as well as their own.

The third research question to be answered was; how do the senior officers at West Pierce Fire & Rescue view the cultural changes in the organization? This question was answered through interviews of both the Chief and Deputy Chief of WPFR. Fire Chief Ken Sharp was the first to be interviewed.

When Chief Sharp was asked what the primary focus was when going through the merger, he found it changed very quickly from the technical aspects to the people. This merger was very emotional for both the internal members of the organization as well as the external customers or the citizens served by each fire district. The Cities of Lakewood and University Place had very different cultures. The respective communities did not want to lose their fire department identity, and the leaders of the department had to take a tremendous amount of time reassuring the public the services provided would not change for the worse, in fact it would improve due to additional services at a reduced cost.

The same was true for the internal members of both organizations. Each entity had their own culture and identity and employees feared things would change. The leaders of the organization spent a considerable amount of time reassuring employees, explaining that changes would happen but, things would not change for the worse. Chief Sharp felt WPFR is not done with the changes yet, but the vast majority of employees had come to grips with the merger and

understood it was not a bad thing. He did not believe the cultures were fully blended because there was not enough time after the merger to create one culture. He went on to say there was really nothing wrong with having multiple cultures within the organization, citing the differences that exist between shifts and the individual cultures each of them has established. It does not become a problem unless these cultures become destructive.

Deputy Chief Mitch Sagers was also interviewed for the project. Deputy Chief Sagers said WPFR did not go through an official strategic planning process to address concerns associated with merging the different organizational cultures, but he did feel the leaders of the organization knew enough about both organizations to determine the cultures were very similar from the start.

Deputy Chief Sagers felt the Lakewood culture had dominated due to a couple of factors. Size was the first factor as Lakewood was twice as large as University Place prior to the merger, both in staff size and the geographic size of the district. The second reason was the effort they had put into long range strategic planning.

When asked if WPFR had difficulty assimilating the different organizational cultures he said no. The reason he gave for this was that failure was never an option. The message was given from the top down that the merger needed to work. There will always be people who are not on board with change, but most of the employees recognized this needed to happen for the long term health of both organizations.

Deputy Chief Sagers spoke of how the transitional committees were the keys to the successes WPFR had in terms of blending the organizational cultures of the two districts. The leaders of the district formed operational transition committees to determine how things would be done as WPFR. The committees were formed with employees from each organization. There

were committees on everything from operations to facilities. Every division in the organization was represented by a transitional committee. This process allowed employees to have a say in how WPFR would function as a new organization. Both University Place and Lakewood Fire Departments had things they did very well and the transitional committees allowed the employees to come up with the best way to function as WPFR.

Chief Sagers did not feel the cultures had been completely blended as this takes time. He believed this would be accomplished inside of five years, as senior members retire and perspectives begin to change.

The fourth research question to be answered was; how do employees at West Pierce Fire & Rescue view the cultural changes in the organization? This question was answered through interviews and a survey.

West Pierce Firefighters Local 1488 President and Suppression Captain Layne Bladow was interviewed to see how WPFR firefighters view the cultural changes in the organization. Captain Bladow did not feel one culture dominated in the merger. Some items were brought from each agency. Basically, both organizations had the same mentality and interests, but had different ways of doing the same job. The biggest issue firefighters had was the fear of the unknown. As time went by, the changes were easier. The former University Place Fire Department employees were seeing more and different types of calls and they were very excited about it.

Captain Bladow felt there were still two separate cultures depending on if you worked in University Place or Lakewood. The stations from the previous Lakewood Fire Department were still a bit more laid back from the previous University Place Fire Department, but he felt it would change over time.

The second interview conducted regarding how employees at WPFR view the cultural change in the organization was Local 1488 Vice President and Suppression Captain Dave Kuhn. He felt there were ways the department had difficulties in assimilating the different organizational cultures into one. He says he still heard a lot of, "That's not how we do it." Everyone was learning how WPFR would do things as opposed to how each organization used to do things.

Captain Kuhn thought the leaders of the organization went through a strategic process to address the concerns associated with blending the different organizational cultures. He noted this time, as opposed to the merger attempt in the 1990s, leaders got involvement from all levels to decide how to merge the two organizations. He also noted that as much as the departments operated alike, they also operated very differently. For example, University Place had only two fire stations where Lakewood had five. Managing a smaller organization is much different than managing a larger one. Due to employee involvement he felt employees were taking the changes very positively.

He also believed WPFR should be a model for the way fire service organizations should merge. The more you can work on aligning the departments prior to the merger the better off you are. For example, the firefighters were working under the same contract prior to the merger, the organizations trained together as well. WPFR did not wait until the merger happened to start working together.

A questionnaire titled West Pierce Fire & Rescue Culture Change was also conducted and the data received was analyzed to answer the final research question: How do employees at WPFR view the cultural changes in the organization? Of the employees who responded to the survey, 67.5% of the respondents were former Lakewood employees and 32.5% were University

Place employees. Prior to the merger, Lakewood was twice the size of University Place, so these numbers are in line with that.

Several items stood out in the survey. 82.6% of WPFR employees felt their ideas were heard by their immediate supervisor, while 76.3% of them felt comfortable expressing their ideas in the organization. Respondents were asked if they thought the culture changes were mostly positive and 47.5% of them either agreed or strongly agreed, but 41% of them were neutral. When asked if the culture changes were mostly negative, nearly 52% of them either disagreed or strongly disagreed, with 36.7% being neutral. Another area with clear results was around the topic of customer service. Nearly 90% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. Over 86% of respondents had fun coming to work at WPFR. When asked if WPFR has created one new culture respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed 44.3% of the time while 34.2% were neutral. Only 21.6% of respondents felt one new culture had been created.

There were some differences in responses when the data was broken down by former Lakewood employees and former University Place employees. One difference is in the percentages of employees who feel the culture changes are mostly positive. Former Lakewood employees were mostly neutral on this statement at 52.8%, while former University Place employees felt the culture changes were positive nearly 81% of the time. The same disparity occurred regarding the culture changes being mostly negative. Former Lakewood employees were neutral regarding this statement 46.3% of the time, while former University Place employees either disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement nearly 84% of the time.

Another major difference between former Lakewood and University Place employees is their response to the statement; the traditions to which I was accustomed have changed now that

we are WPFR. Former Lakewood employees disagreed with this statement 43.4% of the time while 42.3% of former University Place employees felt their traditions had changed.

The open ended questions provided some interesting results. Question 5 asked respondents to give some examples of the positive cultural changes they have seen now that we are WPFR. There were two comments which were seen time and again in the survey. The first one being that there was a new enthusiasm as the young folks and senior folks intermingle. The second comment appearing several times was that new people can provide a new perspective.

Question 6 asked employees to give some examples of the negative cultural changes they have seen now that we are WPFR. There were also a couple of comments here which appeared several times. The first one being at times it seems to be us versus them. Respondents also felt there were individuals standing in the way of change. Finally many respondents felt there was some over management from the north (University Place) creeping to the south (Lakewood).

Question 7 asked respondents how WPFR can improve communications. Thirteen respondents felt communications were good. Some suggestions were to have more face to face communication, encourage more two way communications and maintenance of the hot sheets, e-mails and shift meetings.

Question 8 asked employees what management did right in the merger process in regards to promoting a positive culture. The comments that came up several times were; management kept the body informed with interactions and hot sheets, the transitional committees allowed us to provide input and there were good communications and an open door policy. Employees also felt it was good management moved slowly and started the merger process long before it actually happened.

In question 9 employees were asked what management could have done differently to make the merger process easier on the staff. The only clear response here was there will be growing pains no matter what, it takes time to blend. The entire questionnaire and results are located in Appendix A.

Discussion

The research indicates that mergers have been happening throughout the United States and abroad for years. These mergers can be as large as multinational corporations or as small as two fire departments coming together. The reasons for these mergers are varied, but the most common reasons are reduced costs and increased efficiencies. The research indicates often times during a merger, the cultures of the two organizations are overlooked which can lead to cultural issues. These issues can mean the difference between a successful merger and a failed merger (Herd & Silverstone, 2010).

A lot can be learned from private industry which can be utilized by fire service organizations when coordinating mergers. Culture should be a strategic consideration in the merger process and cultural integration should be driven from the top down. It is important to not only look at the few cultural similarities as proof that a merger will work, but cultural differences must also be taken into account (Pritchett, 2010). This point should be taken very seriously in the fire service. The core job is the same in fire service organizations across the country, but the way the job is done can be very different. Just because both organizations are fire departments does not mean they are culturally compatible and should merge.

Organizations in the same type of business rarely start with a common culture. Cultural assessments should be done to establish the differences and steps should be taken to address those differences. These cultural assessments should be done several times, once prior to the

merger, once in the beginning stages of the merger and again post merger to identify and address

any unanticipated challenges (Herd & Silverstone, 2010). In WPFR, no cultural assessment was

performed prior to the merger, although as a result of this research, an assessment was done in

the initial stages of the merger. Research supports doing another assessment in about a year to

identify any unanticipated challenges.

Looking at a variety of corporate mergers can provide fire service leaders with the

opportunity to learn from the successes and failures of other organizations. The first example

researched for this project was Daimler-Chrysler. Prior to their merger both corporations were

high performers. After the merger, the Chrysler product line began losing money. Studies have

shown this was the result of Daimler imposing their structured culture onto the risk takers at

Chrysler. Daimler proposed this merger was one of equals, but did not treat Chrysler as an

equal. Many of the leaders at Chrysler who made the company so successful began to leave the

organization, eroding the culture and making them less and less competitive in the marketplace.

The culture clashes ultimately led to the failure of this merger and in May of 2007 Daimler

finally sold Chrysler ("Daimler, Chrylser A Failed Merger," 2008).

It is important for fire service leaders to also look at corporate merger successes to see if

they can implement some of these strategies in fire department mergers. The success story

studied as part of this research project was Hewlett Packard and Compaq. This merger was also

slated as a merger of equals even though Hewlett Packard was twice the size of Compaq. The

difference in this situation is Hewlett Packard actually treated it as a merger of equals. Hewlett

Packard did not ignore the cultural issues which often come with a merger of such large

corporations. In fact, they actually assigned a Cultural Integration Team to complete a Culture

Due Diligence Study. The study revealed valuable information from employees of both pre-

merge companies regarding what they valued most in their organizations. HP then used this information to create what they called the "culture cornerstones" (Murray Allen, 2002).

They then looked at the values from Compaq and HP and added input from the Cultural Due Diligence Study. From there the CIT rewrote the values and common corporate objectives using the HP framework. They did not start with a clean sheet of paper, rather focused on what each organization valued and wanted to keep moving forward (Murray Allen, 2002).

The one area HP could have improved on is leaving the CIT in place longer than it did. The initial operational transition in the merger was very successful. CEO Carly Fiorina prepared employees from these two companies to work together, but the long term strategy faltered. In 2005, HP ended up replacing her with Mark Hurd, who took the foundation laid by Fiorina and moved the company forward.

In the case of HP and Compaq, it is clear the culture was not ignored which led this merger to be a successful one in the long term. The fire service and WPFR can learn a great deal from cases like this. HP and Compaq laid a clear path to create cultural integration. Other organizations can utilize the same steps and be just as successful.

In addition to studying corporate mergers, it is also important for fire service leaders to learn from those who have gone before them. WPFR was not the first fire department to go through a merger and it won't be the last. Interviews with nearby fire service leaders who had already gone through mergers were very valuable in this research. Each one of them had a learning experience or a piece of advice to offer. East Pierce Fire & Rescue found over time they have changed the way they do mergers and have begun to draw employees in to let them be part of the process. This has allowed for open communications and employee involvement.

Chief McDonald advised mixing up the firefighters after a merger. The quicker the firefighters are mixed together, the quicker cultural integration will take place.

This corresponds with the research done by Weiss (1998). Weiss found cultural immersion to be a proven method of reducing cross-cultural tension. He further discussed how firefighters should be forced to work with employees from the other agency as well as their own to see how the other half lives. Cultural immersion will allow a blended culture to develop on its own.

EPFR and CPFR both rebid stations as a way to blend the cultures. EPFR did these rebids voluntarily. CPFR rebid their stations when they merged with Puyallup. They did two, one year bids to integrate the Puyallup firefighters throughout the district; from there they will do three year bids. According to the questionnaire results in Appendix A, several WPFR employees thought rebidding stations could have been a good way to make the merger process easier on employees.

Chief Doug Willis and Deputy Chief Keith Wright from Central Pierce Fire & Rescue also had some advice to offer. Deputy Chief Wright spoke of how their merger with Puyallup was not like many of their other mergers in the fact it happened so fast. Due to time constraints, former Puyallup employees were given a CPFR policy manual and told this is how they would be doing business in the future. This had the unanticipated result of upsetting those employees. Because of this unanticipated challenge, Chief Willis recommended moving slowly and systematically during a merger. He also said communication is very important in a merger because if you don't communicate employees will think the worst.

There is one way fire service mergers are often different than corporate mergers. Each and every fire service leader interviewed made the statement that no one would lose their job or

take a pay cut as a result of the merger. This differs from corporate mergers, since some of the

cost savings in a corporate merger happen through the elimination of duplicate positions.

Another common theme in the research was cultural immersion or blending takes time.

This doesn't happen overnight. WPFR Fire Chief Ken Sharp and Deputy Chief Mitch Sagers

don't think the cultures at WPFR would be fully blended for three to five years. Both the

President and Vice President of Local 1488 Layne Bladow and Dave Kuhn were slightly more

optimistic, believing the cultures would be blended in one to two years. The West Pierce Fire &

Rescue Culture Change Questionnaire located in Appendix A also reinforced the fact it takes

time to change. Question 9 in the survey asks what management could have done differently to

make the merger process easier on the staff and six people responded, "There will be growing

pains no matter what, it takes time to blend."

The results of the survey were in line with some of the information found in the literature

review. For example, Alyn (2011) discusses how firefighter resistance to change is a myth.

Looking at the survey results for former University Place employees, nearly 60% of them agreed

or strongly agreed that the way they did business has changed since becoming WPFR. The same

group of respondents noted the changes were positive 81% of the time. Alyn believes

firefighters only resist change if they don't see a benefit or if they didn't help to create the

change. Clearly most employees saw there was a benefit to the change.

In order for employees to get excited about the change, the leaders must give them the

authority to improve their department (Karpluk & Quan, 2010). If employees feel involved in

the change they will take ownership and feel a sense of pride in it. As indicated in the results of

the questionnaire, when employees were asked what management did right in the merger process

in regards to creating a positive culture, employees said WPFR implemented transitional

committees which allowed employees to provide input. In an open ended question, 13 of 80 respondents made this statement or a very similar one.

Recommendations

Based on the literature review, original research and data analysis, the following recommendations are made for WPFR. Since the merger between Lakewood Fire District 2 and University Place Fire Department happened so recently, the cultures are not fully blended yet and one new WPFR culture has not been formed. Part of this is just a matter of time. Based on the interviews with other fire service leaders who have gone through multiple mergers and the interview with Anne Murray Allen, cultural integration takes time. WPFR employees must have time to come together to determine what behaviors will work for the new organization, thus building a new culture.

One recommendation would be to continue open, two-way communications. Based on the survey results employees at WPFR feel communications are effective. They find the "Hot Sheets" and e-mail sent out by Chief Sharp to be valuable communication tools. They also believe the quarterly shift meetings are a good way to get information out to the employees. Communication is vitally important to blending cultures. WPFR leaders need to continue to make sure all employees understand the goals, mission and values of the organization. This provides employees with a clear direction of how business should be done as WPFR. The survey results also show that WPFR employees clearly understand the mission. If you asked any employee what the motto of the organization was they could tell you, "Respond Efficiently. Execute Flawlessly. BE NICE!" This message is continually broadcast to all employees and is even printed on WPFR business cards.

Another recommendation would be to do a voluntary rebid of stations.   Rebidding stations helps employees see how the other half lives, which will reduce the "us vs. them" mentality and will allow a blended culture to develop on its own over time.

The next recommendation would be to conduct a follow up cultural assessment. There was an assessment conducted just after the merger as part of this research project, but assessing the culture should be done prior to a merger, in the beginning stages of the merger and again post merger. This will allow WPFR leadership to identify any unanticipated challenges before problems are created for the organization. This recommendation would also be beneficial if WPFR merged with any other organizations in the future.

As far as future mergers go, WPFR should conduct a culture due diligence study prior to the merger. This study should focus on what employees value most, prior to the occurrence of the merger.   From these values, the basis for the blended culture can be formed. In addition, the culture should be analyzed again post merger to make sure the long term goals are still being met.

One thing WPFR did very well according to the employee survey was the implementation of the transitional committees which allowed employees from both organizations to come together and decide how things should be done in the new organization. This is something any organization going into a merger should attempt to do. The research proved that allowing employees to have input is invaluable in a merger. Allowing them to create solutions to the problems will create more buy-in which will increase morale.

The most important recommendation for other organizations planning to merge is to be proactive about cultural issues. It is often times easier to focus on the operations, budget and daily tasks associated with a merger, leaving cultural integration to chance. Addressing cultural

integration can mean the difference between a successful merger which meets the goals of a

more efficient and effective department and a failed one.

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Appendix A

West Pierce Fire & Rescue Culture Change Survey

Question 1 – Which organization did you work for prior to the merger?

	Response Percent	Response Count
Lakewood Fire District 2	67.5%	54
University Place Fire Department	32.5%	26
	Answered question	80

Question 2 – (Optional) How long have you been on the job?

	Response Percent	Response Count
0-5 years	21.3%	17
6-10 years	16.3%	13
11-15 years	6.3%	5
16-20 years	16.3%	13
Over 20 years	40%	32
	Answered question	80

Question 3 – (Optional) My current job at WPFR would be classified as:

	Response Percent	Response Count
Suppression	61.3%	49
Day Shift	31.3%	25
Fire Comm	7.5%	6
	Answered question	80

Question 4 – Choose the category that best fits your feeling on each of the following statements.

Survey Results for West Pierce Fire & Rescue Employees						
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Response Count
My ideas are heard by my immediate supervisor	2.5% (2)	3.8% (3)	11.3% (9)	48.8% (39)	33.8% (27)	80
The majority of employees, 82.6% of them, either agrees or strongly agrees their ideas are heard by their immediate supervisor.						
I feel comfortable expressing my ideas in the organization	2.5% (2)	8.8% (7)	12.5% (10)	45% (36)	31.3% (25)	80
The majority of employees, 76.3% of them, either agrees or strongly agrees they feel comfortable expressing their ideas in the organization.						
I have seen drastic cultural changes in the organization since the merger	5.1% (4)	32.9% (26)	35.4% (28)	20.3% (16)	6.3% (5)	79
There is no clear response to this question, the results are spread over disagree, neutral and agree.						
The culture changes have been mostly positive	0% (0)	11.5% (9)	41% (32)	44.9% (35)	2.6% (2)	78
47.5% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed the culture changes have mostly been positive and 41% were neutral.						
The culture changes have been mostly negative	11.4% (9)	40.5% (32)	36.7% (29)	11.4% (9)	0% (0)	79
The results were slightly clearer when asked if the culture changes were mostly negative. Nearly 52% of respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement and 36.7% were neutral.						
Communications have improved since we became WPFR	9% (7)	20.5% (16)	50% (39)	17.9% (14)	2.6% (2)	78
The results of this question showed 50% of respondents were neutral regarding communications.						
The way we do business has changed now that we are WPFR	1.3% (1)	31.6% (25)	26.6% (21)	32.9% (26)	7.6% (6)	79
The responses were pretty evenly spread between disagree, neutral and agree. No clear picture was presented as to how business has changed now that we are WPFR.						

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Response Count
The traditions to which I was accustomed have changed now that we are WPFR	2.5% (2)	36.7% (29)	27.8% (22)	31.6% (25)	1.3% (1)	79
The responses were pretty evenly spread between disagree, neutral and agree. No clear picture was presented as to how respondents felt regarding the change in traditions.						
I believe that customer service is important at WPFR	1.3% (1)	0% (0)	8.9% (7)	29.1% (23)	60.8% (48)	79
Nearly 90% of respondents feel customer service is important at WPFR.						
I have fun coming to work at WPFR	1.3% (1)	3.8% (3)	8.9% (7)	38% (30)	48.1% (38)	79
Over 86% of respondents have fun coming to work at WPFR.						
I understand the mission of WPFR	1.3% (1)	3.8% (3)	6.3% (5)	38% (30)	50.6% (40)	79
Over 88% of respondents understand the mission of WPFR.						
I feel WPFR is the right size to provide optimal service to the community	2.6% (2)	9.0% (7)	17.9% (14)	50% (39)	20.5% (16)	78
70.5% of respondents feel WPFR is the right size to provide optimal service to the community.						
WPFR could better serve our community if we merged with other fire service organizations	10.1% (8)	19% (15)	40.5% (32)	21.5% (17)	8.9% (7)	79
Over 40% of respondents were neutral on this question. The other responses were distributed pretty evenly among agree and disagree, with some outliers who strongly disagrees and strongly agreed.						
WPFR has created one new culture	3.8% (3)	40.5% (32)	34.2% (27)	20.3% (16)	1.3% (1)	79
A large number of respondents feel there has not been one new culture created at 44.3%. A third of respondents were neutral on the subject and only 21.6% feel there is one new culture.						
WPFR is just a larger version of Lakewood Fire District 2	7.6% (6)	41.8% (33)	16.5% (13)	26.6% (21)	7.6% (6)	79
Nearly 50% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement. Over a third of respondents agreed with the statement.						
WPFR is just a larger version of University Place Fire Department	17.7% (14)	59.5% (47)	19% (15)	3.8% (3)	0% (0)	79
Over 77% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement.						

Further analysis was done on statements where there was no clear trend. Results were separated by which department they worked for prior to the merger to see if former University Place and former Lakewood employees felt the same or differently on these issues. The results are found in the following two charts.

Survey Results for former Lakewood Employees						
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Response Count
My ideas are heard by my immediate supervisor	3.7% (2)	3.7% (2)	11.1% (6)	44.4% (24)	37% (20)	54
No clear difference was seen between the feelings of Lakewood and University Place employees on this statement.						
I feel comfortable expressing my ideas in the organization	3.7% (2)	9.3% (5)	7.4% (4)	42.6% (23)	37% (20)	54
No clear difference was seen between the feelings of Lakewood and University Place employees on this statement.						
I have seen drastic cultural changes in the organization since the merger	3.8% (2)	34% (18)	34% (18)	20.8% (11)	7.5% (4)	53
No clear difference was seen between the feelings of Lakewood and University Place employees on this statement.						
The culture changes have been mostly positive	0% (0)	17% (9)	52.8% (28)	30.2% (16)	0% (0)	53
The response from former Lakewood employees to this question was 52.8% neutral while nearly 81% of former University Place employees agreed or strongly agreed the changes were positive.						
The culture changes have been mostly negative	9.3% (5)	27.8% (15)	46.3% (25)	16.7% (9)	0% (0)	54
The response from former Lakewood employees to this question was 46.3% neutral while 84% of former University Place employees either disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement.						
Communications have improved since we became WPFR	13.5% (7)	26.9% (14)	51.9% (27)	7.7% (4)	0% (0)	52
Most former Lakewood employees were neutral on this statement, with 40.4% either disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. Former University Place employees were neutral 46.2% of the time with 46.2% either agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement.						

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Response Count
The way we do business has changed now that we are WPFR	1.9% (1)	35.9% (19)	30.2% (16)	30.2% (16)	1.9% (1)	53
Former Lakewood employees had no clear result to this statement. Results were spread relatively evenly amongst disagree, neutral and agree. This was not the case for former University Place employees. Nearly 60% of them either agreed or strongly agreed with this statement, while some felt neutral and others disagreed.						
The traditions to which I was accustomed have changed now that we are WPFR	3.7% (2)	43.4% (23)	24.5% (13)	26.4% (14)	1.9% (1)	53
The results on this statement were mirror opposites, depending on which organization respondents worked for prior to the merger. Former Lakewood employees disagreed with this statement 43.4% of the time, while 42.3% of former University Place employees felt their traditions had changed.						
I feel WPFR is the right size to provide optimal service to the community	3.8% (2)	9.6% (5)	21.2% (11)	42.3% (22)	23.4% (12)	52
No clear difference was seen between the feelings of Lakewood and University Place employees on this statement.						
WPFR could better serve our community if we merged with other fire service organizations	13.5% (7)	19.2% (10)	34.6% (18)	19.2% (10)	13.5% (7)	52
This statement showed that former University Place employees are more neutral on this issue while former Lakewood employees are spread over all the areas with only 34.6% being neutral.						
WPFR has created one new culture	3.7% (2)	45.3% (24)	32.1% (17)	17% (9)	1.9% (1)	53
No clear difference was seen between the feelings of Lakewood and University Place employees on this statement.						
WPFR is just a larger version of Lakewood Fire District 2	9.4% (5)	43.4% (23)	15.1% (8)	24.5% (13)	7.5% (4)	53
No clear difference was seen between the feelings of Lakewood and University Place employees on this statement.						
WPFR is just a larger version of University Place Fire Department	18.5% (10)	57.4% (31)	18.5% (10)	5.6% (3)	0% (0)	54
No clear difference was seen between the feelings of Lakewood and University Place employees on this statement.						

Survey Results for former University Place Employees					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Response Count
My ideas are heard by my immediate supervisor	0% (0)	3.8% (1)	11.5% (3)	57.7% (15)	26.9% (7)	26
No clear difference was seen between the feelings of Lakewood and University Place employees on this statement.						
I feel comfortable expressing my ideas in the organization	0% (0)	7.7% (2)	23.1% (6)	50% (13)	19.2% (5)	26
No clear difference was seen between the feelings of Lakewood and University Place employees on this statement.						
I have seen drastic cultural changes in the organization since the merger	7.7% (2)	30.8% (8)	38.5% (10)	19.2% (5)	3.8% (1)	26
No clear difference was seen between the feelings of Lakewood and University Place employees on this statement.						
The culture changes have been mostly positive	0% (0)	0% (0)	19.2% (5)	73.1% (19)	7.7% (2)	26
The response from former Lakewood employees to this question was 52.8% neutral while nearly 81% of former University Place employees agreed or strongly agreed the changes were positive.						
The culture changes have been mostly negative	16% (4)	68% (17)	16% (4)	0% (0)	0% (0)	25
The response from former Lakewood employees to this question was 46.3% neutral while 84% of former University Place employees either disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement.						
Communications have improved since we became WPFR	0% (0)	7.7% (2)	46.2% (12)	38.5% (10)	7.7% (2)	26
Most former Lakewood employees were neutral on this statement, with 40.4% either disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. Former University Place employees were neutral 46.2% of the time with 46.2% either agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement.						
The way we do business has changed now that we are WPFR	0% (0)	23.1% (6)	19.2% (5)	38.5% (10)	19.2% (5)	26
Former Lakewood employees had no clear result to this statement. Results were spread relatively evenly amongst disagree, neutral and agree. This was not the case for former University Place employees. Nearly 60% of them either agreed or strongly agreed with this statement, while some felt neutral and others disagreed.						

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Response Count
The traditions to which I was accustomed have changed now that we are WPFR	0% (0)	23.1% (6)	34.6% (9)	42.3% (11)	0% (0)	26
The results on this statement were mirror opposites, depending on which organization respondents worked for prior to the merger. Former Lakewood employees disagreed with this statement 43.4% of the time, while 42.3% of former University Place employees felt their traditions had changed.						
I feel WPFR is the right size to provide optimal service to the community	0% (0)	7.7% (2)	11.5% (3)	65.4% (17)	15.4% (4)	26
No clear difference was seen between the feelings of Lakewood and University Place employees on this statement.						
WPFR could better serve our community if we merged with other fire service organizations	3.8% (1)	19.2% (5)	50% (13)	26.9% (7)	0% (0)	26
This statement showed that former University Place employees are more neutral on this issue while former Lakewood employees are spread over all the areas with only 34.6% being neutral.						
WPFR has created one new culture	3.8% (1)	30.8% (8)	38.5% (10)	26.9% (7)	0% (0)	26
No clear difference was seen between the feelings of Lakewood and University Place employees on this statement.						
WPFR is just a larger version of Lakewood Fire District 2	3.8% (1)	38.5% (10)	23.1% (6)	26.9% (7)	7.7% (2)	26
No clear difference was seen between the feelings of Lakewood and University Place employees on this statement.						
WPFR is just a larger version of University Place Fire Department	19.2% (5)	61.5% (16)	19.2% (5)	0% (0)	0% (0)	26
No clear difference was seen between the feelings of Lakewood and University Place employees on this statement.						

Question 5 – Give some examples of the positive cultural changes you have seen now that we are WPFR.

The following items were responses given multiple times to this open ended question. The stars behind the statements indicate how many times this statement or a similar statement was made.

Positions have become more specialized and there is greater depth**
We have similar cultures with a focus on customer service**
Open communication**
Opportunity to meet new people***
Opportunities to move to different stations****
Chiefs sitting down to talk**
New enthusiasm as the young folks and senior folks intermingle*******
Best of both worlds**
Opportunity to develop a new West Pierce culture**
New people can provide a new perspective*******
Immediate response from the Chief and/or leadership**
New opportunities for training***
No more widget making/emphasis on the goal and not how we get there***

Question 6 – Give some examples of the negative cultural changes you have seen now that we are WPFR

The following items were responses given multiple times to this open ended question. The stars behind the statements indicate how many times this statement or a similar statement was made.

At times there seems to be us vs. them*****
Don't know everyone anymore**
Individuals are standing in the way of change****
7:00 starts****
Moving Central Stores and Administration to station 31****
Over management from the north is creeping to the south****
Loss of internal and external customer service***
Leaving areas uncovered for various reasons can lead to increased response times**

Question 7 – How can we improve communications at WPFR?

The following items were responses given multiple times to this open ended question. The stars behind the statements indicate how many times this statement or a similar statement was made.

Communications are good*************
Over communicate**
Morning shift meetings with officers**
Continue with hot sheets, e-mails and shift meetings********
More face to face communication****

BC's should be better engaged in the goals/mission of the organization as well as carrying forward management's messages and expectations***
 "Partners in Service" seems to be eroding – listen to our concerns***
Encourage open discussions or 2 way communication*****
Quarterly officer meetings**

Question 8 – What did management do right in the merger process in regards to promoting a positive culture?

The following items were responses given multiple times to this open ended question. The stars behind the statements indicate how many times this statement or a similar statement was made.

Sold the merger to the public***
Kept leadership circulating and interacting with people**
Kept the body informed with interactions and hot sheets*************
Encouraged us to train together and had meet and greets****
Transitional committees allowed us to provide input*************
Moved slowly and started the merger process long before it actually happened*******
Took control of the rumor mill**
Good communications and open door policy*********
Management was involved in establishing the culture and high expectations****
Established the "need" to merge***

Question 9 – What could management have done differently to make the merger process easier on the staff?

The following items were responses given multiple times to this open ended question. The stars behind the statements indicate how many times this statement or a similar statement was made.

Clearer communication on the office moves. Many were hurt and angered at the short notice of the office move****
Administration should be at Station 20 instead of Station 31***
We did a great job merging as one***
If we had change more often such as rebids every year**
8:00 start time**
Central stores is no longer central**
Administration should quit spending money on things not absolutely necessary**
There will be growing pains no matter what, it takes time to blend******